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ABSTRACT

About 38 percent of all fourth-graders have reading skills below the basic level and thus cannot read well enough to complete grade level assignments. Research clearly demonstrates that most reading failure is preventable and most high-risk students can improve their reading and writing achievement with expert instruction. Research also indicates that teachers who use proven methods and who are given high-quality professional development can teach all but 2-5 percent of children to read. Most teachers are not prepared to teach reading. The average teacher takes 3 semester hours or 1 course on how to teach reading. Teaching reading requires specialized knowledge about language, how children learn and acquire literacy skills, and a variety of instructional strategies. To ensure that teachers are adequately trained to teach reading, changes are needed in pre-service teacher preparation and professional development. Many states are taking legislative action on literacy-related issues that include provisions to improve teacher education and professional development. Policymakers wanting to improve reading instruction may want to consider maintaining the goal that all children will read at grade level by supporting research-based reading instruction and aligning teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development with effective reading principles. (SM)

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Issue Brief

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Improving Reading by Preparing Teachers*

Summary

Thirty-eight percent of all fourth-grade children have reading skills below the "basic" level. Students who read below the "basic" level cannot read well enough to complete grade level assignments.[1] Research clearly demonstrates most reading failure is preventable and most "high-risk" students can improve their reading and writing achievement with expert instruction.[2] Studies by the National Reading Panel, National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, Learning First Alliance, and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development[3] show that teachers who use proven methods and who are given high-quality professional development can teach all but 2 percent to 5 percent of children to read.[4]

Most teachers are not prepared to teach reading. The average teacher takes three semester hours or one course in how to teach reading.[5] Teaching reading requires specialized knowledge about language, how children learn and acquire literacy skills, and a variety of instructional strategies. To ensure that teachers are adequately trained to teach reading, changes are needed in preservice teacher preparation and professional development. Policymakers wanting to improve reading instruction may want to consider.

- maintaining the goal that all children will read at grade level by supporting research-based reading instruction; and
- aligning teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development with effective reading principles.

Teaching Reading Requires Specialized Knowledge

Educators, policymakers, and the public tend to underestimate how much a teacher must learn to teach reading well. Teaching reading to novices is a technical and challenging task, and it requires more than an enthusiasm for literature. Children in the same classroom vary substantially in their ability to learn to read and, for many, printed language is difficult to decipher and recall. Reading must be skillfully and deliberately taught. All aspects of reading instruction, including speech sound and alphabet awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, writing, and motivation to read widely, require a considerable understanding of language. Teachers need to study language structure as well as the techniques for teaching it to children.[6]

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However, the research on reading instruction has yet to be applied on a widespread, consistent basis. A chasm exists between the findings of research and instruction in the classroom. Although teachers want to do well by their students, they are often certified and employed without knowledge of the most important tools for fighting illiteracy. Their preparation in literacy instruction is too brief, too general, too shallow, or too dependent on ideas not supported by research. Even within the same state university system, differing course content and varying teacher preparation occur.

Preservice Teacher Education Must Be Strengthened

To adequately prepare teachers to teach reading, preservice teacher education programs must be strengthened. In May 1999, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) issued a report summarizing states' reading instruction requirements for elementary teaching certification.[7] Although reading is the cornerstone of academic success, ETS found that states typically require preservice teachers to take only one three-credit course in reading instruction. Courses in language development, language structure, reading psychology, or practices validated by research typically are not required. Many high school and special education teachers are not required to take courses in reading instruction even though reading problems are common in older and special-needs children.

Several factors help explain the inadequate reading instruction requirements in teacher preparation programs. An implicit assumption of preparation programs is that anyone who can read can also teach reading, arguing that reading is a "natural" process that unfolds if children are read to and given appealing literature. Influential leaders in reading education have also minimized the importance of teachers' knowledge of specific skills.[8] In addition, thorough teacher preparation can be costly and time consuming, and providers and taxpayers are sometimes unwilling to pay the higher costs of expert teacher training and support. Finally, schools of education often are resistant to change and do not reward professors who spend time supervising instruction. Under traditional requirements, student teachers can graduate without having taught a single person to read or having juggled the diverse needs and learning styles of an entire class.

The American Federation of Teachers recently issued a call for a core curriculum in the preparation of reading instructors, citing areas of content knowledge and skill that all teachers of reading should share.[9] These include an understanding of how children learn to read and what causes reading difficulty; a knowledge of English language structure; the acquisition of teaching skills in each major area of instruction; and the ability to assess children to determine teaching goals. Adequate preparation could easily require four preservice courses on the study of language structure, reading psychology, assessment, and instruction; a practicum; and follow-up mentoring for a year or more.

Professional Development for Working Teachers Must Be Enhanced

Much is known about professional development that truly improves teaching, and much is known about the components of effective reading instruction. How best to marry these two knowledge bases is a matter of debate, but there are models for positive change. The principles and practices recommended by the National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (NPEAT) offer useful guidance.[10] Single workshops unconnected to a schoolwide improvement plan do not provide adequate professional development in any topic. Effective professional development could involve a graduate course in instructional strategies for reading, weekly or bimonthly grade-level team meetings to assess students' progress and collaborate on instructional

planning, guided observation by peers, and independent study arising from teachers' self-evaluations of their strengths and weaknesses.
NPEAT also notes that the content of professional development should be clearly articulated and should include the knowledge and skills teachers need to teach reading effectively to students with diverse needs.

States Are Improving Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Many states are taking legislative action on literacy-related issues that include provisions to improve teacher preparation and professional development. **Maryland**, **Ohio**, and **Wisconsin** currently require at least 12 semester hours in reading and language arts instruction for teachers to be licensed to teach in elementary schools.

California Governor Gray Davis established the Governor's Elementary Reading Initiative to develop an interconnected set of professional development and support programs for beginning and noncredentialed K-3 teachers. The program provides a minimum of 120 hours of intensive professional development and instruction to support teachers in analyzing student reading results to determine individual levels of reading proficiency, monitor progress, and adjust instruction to improve reading performance.

Maryland, whose state university chancellor chaired the National Reading Panel, recently took aggressive steps to bring teacher coursework in line with reading research.[11] The state department of education requires Maryland universities to submit plans for reading courses to a review panel of reading experts from around the state. Of 100 course syllabi reviewed, 50 were accepted, 25 were sent back for revision, and 25 were rejected for inappropriate content. In addition, the state is preparing a two-hour licensing examination in reading instruction for elementary school teachers who want to retain their certification.

Idaho enacted a comprehensive literacy and reading interactive plan in spring of 1999. Along with assessments of elementary school students, the plan requires preservice teachers to demonstrate their ability to teach reading successfully. The state board will review the course offerings in teacher preparation programs and develop a preservice assessment for all teachers of kindergarten through grade eight. In addition, the board requires practicing teachers to pass a three-credit, state-approved course in reading instruction to be recertified. The coursework and assessments promote practices congruent with current research on the prevention of reading difficulty.

Oklahoma has enumerated five major components of reading instruction around which its state initiative is organized. The components are closely aligned with research findings and include phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, reading fluency, and comprehension. In addition to a strong focus on student assessment and early intervention in kindergarten through grade two, the initiative gives the state commission on teacher preparation the authority to develop institutes for elementary-grade reading teachers.

In 1996 **Texas** Governor George W. Bush and the governor's business council launched its reading initiative. The Texas Education Agency requires all teachers of kindergarten through grade three to learn how to provide scientific, research-based instruction in beginning reading. Teachers of kindergarten through grade two must also learn how to use the Texas Primary Reading Inventory or another valid approach to identify children at risk for reading failure. The Texas State Board of Education also has launched a master reading teacher certification program that will reward teachers with a $5,000 bonus for completing advanced training and serving a high-needs population.

Utah passed several literacy bills in 1999, including one that establishes a reading skills development center at the University of Utah. The center conducts professional development for new and continuing teachers and provides intervention programs for students with reading difficulties.

Virginia recently adopted new regulations for teacher preparation and licensure that specify the knowledge and skills teachers must acquire to teach all of the components of reading well. Teachers must complete six semester hours that address a comprehensive and well-articulated body of information that complements the Virginia Standards of Learning for English.

State Policymakers and Educators Can Do Much to Improve Reading

As state policymakers and educators seek to raise student achievement, it is important to respond to the specific literacy needs of children and the training needs of teachers. Policymakers may want to consider these recommendations as they focus attention on adequate support for teacher training and professional development in literacy.

- ***Maintain the goal of ensuring that all children will read at grade level and promote the importance of research-based reading instruction.*** Policymakers can bring attention to the critical need for effective reading instruction and can help ensure that the principles of research-based reading instruction are an integral part of state reading initiatives and policies. For example, most reputable and comprehensive research reviews could be disseminated to everyone responsible for reading instruction. Likewise, policymakers can help ensure research-supported principles of effective professional development are widely discussed and implemented. States could also choose to regulate and approve the activities of professional development providers or to adopt policies that specify research-based content for teacher training in reading instruction.
- ***Align policies for teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development with principles of effective reading instruction.*** Policymakers can examine policies for teacher preparation and licensure to ensure new teachers are adequately prepared to teach reading to students with diverse needs and learning styles. They can also adopt policies that require new teachers to demonstrate those abilities before they earn a license. In addition, policymakers can adopt policies for the professional development of in–service teachers that reflect the importance of strong literacy skills and provide teachers with the tools they need to be more effective in the classroom. Much has been learned about what constitutes effective professional development. By combining policies for effective professional development with policies that support principles of strong reading instruction, policymakers can support effective training for teachers in developing the knowledge and skills they need to teach reading well. Policymakers could also consider supporting advanced professional certification for expert reading teachers. Such a policy would clearly specify what these teachers need to know and do, set a high standard for teacher knowledge and ability, and reward expert teachers for working in schools with lower-performing students.

Research confirms that good instruction can prevent or limit serious reading and writing difficulties. Most children will learn if instruction, beginning in kindergarten, includes the critical components identified in numerous studies. Struggling children will be more likely to maintain momentum if they are placed in tutorials with trained specialists even before a special education referral occurs. When schools abide by these principles, very few children will fail to learn how

to read. State policymakers can help schools focus attention on these issues and can provide the necessary support for effective teacher preparation and professional development.

Endnotes

[1] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *NAEP 1998 Reading. A Report Card for the Nation and the States*, 1999.

[2] Marilyn Adams, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Instruction, *Improving the Reading Achievement of America's Children: 10 Research-Based Principles* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan School of Education, 1999); Catherine Snow, Susan Burns, and Peg Griffin, eds., *Preventing Reading Difficulty in Young Children* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998); Jack Fletcher and G. Reid Lyon, "Reading: A Research-based Approach," in *What's Gone Wrong in American's Classrooms?* ed. William Evers (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1998) 49–90; Michael Pressley, *Reading Instruction That Works* (New York, N.Y.: Guildford Press, 1998); The National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

[3] Fletcher and Lyon.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Special database by the Education Testing Service, requested by American Federation of Teachers, *Putting Reading Front and Center: A Resource Guide for Union Advocacy*, (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1999), L8–L12.

[6] American Federation of Teachers, *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do*, (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1998)

[7] Special database by the Education Testing Service.

[8] See reviews of the whole-language movement, such as Marilyn Adams and Maggie Bruck, "Resolving the Great Debate," *American Educator 19* (1995).

[9] American Federation of Teachers, *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do*.

[10] National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, *Improving Professional Development: Research-Based Principles* (Washington, D.C.: National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 1999).

[11] "New Classes Aimed at Reading Teachers Set to Begin in State," The Baltimore Sun (23 April 2000), 2B.

*This *Issue Brief* was written by Louisa Cook Moats from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Early Intervention Project and was edited by Bridget Curran and Mark Ouellette of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.

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